

The Greatest?

“I float like a butterfly, I sting like a bee, his hands can’t hit what his eyes can’t see.” “I am the greatest!” Mohammad Ali

Many of us remember when boxing would take center stage in the days before pay-per-view as “the fights” would be broadcast on TV.

Boxers such as Joe Louis, Rocky Marciano, Sugar Ray Robinson, Joe Frazier, and Mohammad Ali were all household names. My family members were not boxing fans but, as we only had the three main stations from which to choose, we ended up watching a lot of boxing.

Was this the same for any of you?

For years, people have spouted that they were the greatest. We certainly have worked our way through good, better, and best. We also shared that when we are rated in our job performance, we want to be rated as high as we possibly can be. I left teaching on a high note with the highest rating possible. I must have been a great teacher! Well, guess again.

As I shared with the students, I was a third-grade substitute teacher for Friday morning at Mapleshade School. I thought to myself, “I taught

for 30 years in all grades, this should be a piece of cake.” Mercy, it was a great wake-up call for me! I always considered myself as “undefeated” in the classroom but I almost—almost—lost to 21 third graders on Friday. Besides, the first things I had to do were get the students in the room, get a lunch count, attendance, answer 21 times to “Who are you? Is our teacher coming back?” and get the students down the end of the hall to an Art class. After the first five minutes, I was ready to go home.

When I got into the car and drove away from the school, I had a new-found respect for anyone who teaches and, especially, anyone who teaches third grade and the grades below third. Certainly, they are the greatest! But it led me to think, why do we want to be even be the greatest?

Many people have been concerned with their own ranking or self-worth throughout the ages. This even happened in Jesus’ time. As the chosen twelve, the Apostles had left or partially left careers in which they could have or may have achieved superlative status. They loved Jesus and devoted their lives to His teachings. However, because they

were human, they got caught up in who among them was the greatest. Even in James' letter, he writes to the church that they are looking for the wrong things. But what concerns do we have?

Let's look at the answer that was given by Jesus. He tells them whoever wants to be first, must be last. And, to make matters more confusing, he tells them that those whoever welcomes a child welcomes him. What? How could a child be that important? Children had a very low status at the time as they were considered to be burdens and many didn't even live to adulthood. If you were born female, it was even worse because they were supposed to marry you off AND pay a dowry for a husband to take you. Also, the life expectancy rate of a child at the time was not very high. But Jesus wanted them to look beyond that.

Jesus wanted them to have the spirit of a child. By and large, children don't generally have many concerns. They'd like to know when they can play and when they can eat. They want to know that they are safe, loved, and treated fairly. We don't always want to admit it, but we feel the same way. We, too, want to know that we are safe, loved, and treated fairly. Children, at the time, were pretty trusting and they are so

today, until they are taught not to be. We know that things are different today. But, if we welcome Jesus into our lives as easily as most children will welcome us into their lives, offer figurative hugs, be excited when we show up, and want to follow a fine example that shows us that we are safe, loved, treated fairly, and how to do that to others.

We have to be careful, all of us, myself included, to not dig our heels in to show that we're the greatest. I am not the greatest teacher out there and I am not the best pastor. We know that our lives allow us to make mistakes but also to confess those things to God and to ask for forgiveness. We want to welcome Jesus into our lives. Hopefully, we don't want to be the greatest follower of Jesus. I have news for you: every time we start thinking that we must be greater or the greatest, God has a little way of tweaking things around that almost says to us, "Oh really? Watch this!"

My siblings in Christ and those who seek to believe, let us strive to have the attitude of a child in our relationship with Jesus. Let us offer to others the things that a child may still seek today: to be loved, feel safe, and be treated fairly or respectfully. Let us welcome Jesus and indeed,

the Creator who sent Jesus to the earth to become the Messiah. While we strive to be good, better, and best, we have to come to the realization that we are not the greatest. We must keep that humility that welcomes the simple things, shares what we have, and respects the dignity of everyone, even when we don't want to or like the person.

We don't have to float like a butterfly or sting like bee. What we do have to do is to turn to Jesus and turn to God. Psalm 62 tells us "Only in God will my soul be at rest, from God come my hope, my salvation. God alone is my rock of safety, my strength, my glory, my God." God IS great—all the time! All the time—God IS great! Amen.